

A QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

Taking IRWA's professional development program on the road



BY ED OPSTEIN, SR/WA, R/W-NAC, R/W-RAC

When reflecting on the challenges we face as right of way professionals, experiences with landowners might first come to mind. These thoughts may be followed by the politics of dealing with government agencies, clearing encroachments and relocating people from the project path. Well, after teaching in other parts of the world, it's comforting to know that we are in synch with others who are doing similar work around the globe!

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia sits upon massive oil and gas reserves, and the country is eager to continue tapping into those resources. In terms of its top priorities, extensive plans are underway for new investments in pipelines, related facilities, technology and skilled talent. Land title and valuation methods are rapidly taking form, and right of way professionals are focused on developing creative solutions for providing relocation assistance to affected citizens, all while working with local commissions to obtain approvals.

Comparable Challenges

Having recently taught four courses in Saudi Arabia for the oil company Saudi Aramco, I learned that the challenges faced by right of way professionals working in Dhahran are quite similar to those we face in North America. They are required to get valuations of land to be acquired and then negotiate with reluctant private property owners. They often deal with overlapping agencies that have competing agendas and local politics. They also encounter land speculators who drive up costs to such a point that some projects get shelved. And they have the option to use expropriation/condemnation as a last resort.

With some of the world's largest petroleum production facilities, safety is one of Saudi Aramco's core values. A safety-first mindset is emphasized both on and off the job and in the wider community through extensive safety outreach programs and campaigns. The company continuously conducts major safety initiatives to strengthen its culture of safety and to enhance safe practices across all its operations.

Despite our many similarities, there are also some aspects of right of way work in the Middle East that are different or unique. For example, instead of dealing with trees or storage sheds encroaching in the right of way, professionals in Saudi Arabia might be faced with a Bedouin tribe that has set up camp. Rather than relocating some houses or businesses, they might find themselves relocating entire villages. Then there's the heat (try 125° for a few months). And if you need a permit, consider getting a High Order from the King (no, not your boss).

The Path to Certification

Our Saudi Arabian members are active participants in IRWA's Generalist career path, and many have earned the RWA and ARWP Certifications as they work toward the SR/WA Designation. In the last two years, Master Instructor David Burgoyne, SR/WA and Clyde Johnson, SR/WA, R/W-RAC, R/W-URAC also traveled to Dhahran to launch what has become a valuable relationship with right of way professionals there, resulting in a new Affiliate Chapter.

In 2015, David and I were contracted to teach a series of courses for our Saudi Aramco members. David arrived a week before me to teach Courses 400, 403, 603 and 900. I followed with Courses 304, 203, 701 and 700. The participants asked insightful questions and were eager to offer ideas and comparative situations that applied to the topics we covered.

I found the course participants to be highly educated and laser-sharp. Most have attended universities in the United States or the United Kingdom. They have the latest technology, use English for internal email communications, warmly greet new people and are eager to learn. I was impressed with how young and talented they are, not to mention enjoyable to be with. They intend to grow their Chapter and have strong potential for a thriving Young Professionals program.



Enjoying the local cuisine, from left, Salim Al Alyani, ARWP, Majed Al Qahtani, RWA, Muad Al-Ghulaiga, RWA, Zeyad Al-Alyan, IRWA instructors David Burgoyne, SR/WA and Ed Opstein, SR/WA, Abdulhameed Medani, ARWP, Khalid Al Sharif, ARWP, and Mohammed Al Dossary, ARWP.

This assignment brought some interesting challenges and wonderful opportunities. Traveling nonstop for 24 hours was more grueling than I anticipated. However, discovering flavor-filled dishes at a local restaurant or shopping in the old "Souq," or marketplace, were delights I could get nowhere else. And I was surprised to find the Saudi Aramco complex within a western-style city with residential areas, a bowling alley, golf course, library, parks, supermarket, and thankfully, the classic U.S. electric outlet.

Overall, this was a fascinating experience and I felt privileged to make new friends while promoting the IRWA mission. Through our international professional development program, IRWA is sharing knowledge and best practices while creating valuable relationships. I'm honored to be part of this vital initiative with the world's right of way community. As we continue these efforts, everyone will benefit. 🌟



Ed served as Chief of Right of Way and Right of Way Administrator for government agencies before joining Universal Field Services, Inc., where he was Senior Vice President until his

retirement in December 2015. Ed enjoys teaching across the nation and now the world.